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# A SOLDIER AT THE SORBONNE

BY GEORGE BOAS

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IF there is one thing we Americans must accept the blame for, it is the State University. There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world; it is thoroughly American. Early in February, 1919, by a lucky turn of fortune and the mismanagement of a detail I was to be assigned to, I was able to enter two of Monsieur Picavet's courses at the Sorbonne and one at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. Having been an instructor for two years in the University of California, I was naturally interested in comparing this American product with its French counterpart. For they do stand for similar things in their communities; they practically sum up the spirits of them they serve. The University of California represents the ideals and satisfies the needs of the State of California. If you were to look for one institution most adequately typifying a State which achieved its grandeur by the efforts of gold seekers, you could do no better than to select that showy collection of buildings opposite the Golden Gate, in which everything native to the soil is hidden and even the architecture, pieced together from Italian bell-towers, Corinthian columns, and New York National Banks, reminds one of a civilization struggling to be born. And the Sorbonne in its sober and serious way at the side of the Collège de France and opposite the Musée de Cluny reminds one of the complicated and well-knit character of France.

When I went to Berkeley, after about twenty-two years of life on the Atlantic Coast, I was inspired and delighted. The armies of men and women students, the climate, the landscape, the business-like management, the friendliness of the people, all were of a sort bound to charm one whose Western frontier had previously been Grant's Tomb. It was my good fortune to work under a man whose high

consideration for his subordinates made associating with him a pleasure. He gave me complete freedom in every way, allowed me to select my own text-books, encouraged me to lecture as I would, always looked for my Contributor's Clubs when they were due, liked to have me write in my spare moments, and agreed with me that the courses we had to give were a dreadful mistake, and that it was lucky for the higher life that we were giving them rather than some pair of solemn idiots who would believe in their ultimate importance. The colleague with whom I shared my office taught dramatics and used to imitate Gadski singing the *Erlkönig*, with an accompaniment on his desk top. He could do the whole opera of *Faust*—Gounod's of course—including the ballet, and particularly loved to do it as a round-shouldered seeker after truth would sit down for a conference with me. He was so friendly that he insisted on keeping my card on the door even after the Administration had penalized me for going to war. My best friend was that finest of philosophic minds who had read my papers in Phil.I when Royce gave it. Berkeley in those days seemed to me a promised land.

In the same way, as I entered Monsieur Picavet's course in the first six centuries of philosophic thought during the Christian era, and shook hands with my professor who had actually known Taine, and watched six young women and twelve young men seat themselves, young men including a sailor from Brittany, an officer of the Chasseurs with a green and yellow fourragère and a medal of the Legion of Honor, a private of the twenty-second section of the General Staff, and a priest with the Croix de Guerre, my heart felt lighter and I was gladder than ever that the armistice had been signed. I was back at the work which belonged to me, work of which I was part and parcel, work to which I knew I would devote my life and to which I actually did devote exactly two months and twenty days before abandoning it, as it now seems, forever.

Here, too, as in Berkeley, the people were delightful. No one remarked on the odd spectacle of a male person with Aide-de-Camp's insignia on his collar, an Indian's head on his left shoulder, and shiny spurs on his russet boots, carrying a volume of Plotinus in Greek and Latin under his arm. My professor gave me a quiet little room in the Annexe to the Collège de France,

lent me Bouillet's French translation of Plotinus—lest my Greek had become rusty during my military service—and always treated me as an authority on things American, from the development of religious tolerance to the ceremonies of initiation among the Hurons. The Chasseur was making a study of evidences of Aristotelianism in St. Augustine or something of that sort, and loved Gregorian chants and d'Indy. And then there were the other men, each of whom had had a share of active service and had now returned for his examinations. Their cordiality was reminiscent of a finer civilization, wherein the society of nations was real, bound together not by political and commercial aims and by the hope of aggrandisement, but by a common religion and a common hunger for knowledge. At all times, even when our officers were making themselves most thoroughly unpopular in Paris, though our political philosophies may have been hopelessly antagonistic, our community of intellectual interests held us together.

So far my experiences at entering Berkeley were being repeated. But here, as the novels say, all resemblance stopped.

The people who were so charming at Berkeley were members of the faculty. Honest as my students were, they were not on the whole the sort who could love Epictetus and Irving Berlin at the same time. Everyone of my friends at the Sorbonne could have done both. They were not so intellectually straight-laced; they were not high-brows. At any rate, those with whom I talked read Félicien Champsaur as well as Anatole France and were quite as capable of saying that Gerbert was a *type épatant* as that Henri Becque was an analyst who relied more upon words than upon real distinctions. My students in California would have read either Champsaur or Anatole France, but never both. To them it would have seemed trivial to speak of an intellectual pioneer and a pope as a *type épatant*; they would never have dreamed of discussing Monsieur Becque's art, they would have discussed his heroines. They were consistent people, either all black or all white, which leads one to reflect that Jack Spratt and his spouse were probably French.

What made my California students so dreadfully consistent? Why was it that they seemed to feel the various

interests in life to be antagonistic rather than complementary? Why was it so strange to them that a good football player should possibly be a good economist? And why were they largely in the right?

Because, I believe, the university as they knew it made for specialization by its very liberality. When a man can do what he likes, and if he is fairly mature, he becomes individualistic and narrow. He is egoistic like a spoiled child. A University which offers at the same time advanced courses in Ice Cream Making and in Indo-Germanic philology, in Millinery and in Hegel, is likely to be so catholic that it has no educational policy at all. Anyone who has ever taught in such a delightful place knows the chaos which prevails at registration time when an irresistible creature in a yellow silk sweater just *has* to find two more units and wonders if your course in Inorganic Chemistry wouldn't do. He knows that although no subjects are required, units are—or used to be—and that consequently a student studies units and not subjects. Nor does it seem to matter what those units are. To be sure I never mastered the system—it is doubtful whether anyone ever did, for there were in my time junior certificates and certain vaguely defined entrance requirements and all that, which have now been swept aside as relics of an earlier day, a day of standards and discipline. But one will recognize the event and its significance and agree that we have turned out a rather too solemn cohort of ill-educated prigs who are narrow and very unhealthy and often rude, but so proud of their specialty and their Teutonic *grundlichkeit*.

Superficially there is again a resemblance herein to the Sorbonne. No entrance requirements are thrust on one, one can get a liberal education from the *Cours Publics*. But for such a butterfly existence one is not ceremoniously made a Bachelor of Arts. If it is a question of a degree, there are examinations galore. Little books are for sale which tell you all about them. I used to read them over in the Librairie Larousse and gloat over my doctorate. No one ever forced me to take an examination; if I did not want a degree, that was my own affair. But the University of Paris did not decide that anything I took in sufficient quantity warranted my getting a degree. It did not decide furthermore that a Bachelor of Science was an expert hog-raiser simply because the Minister of Agricul-

ture in his turn decided that hogs were necessary to the life of the State.

In California, or in any American State University, if there were sufficient interest in knitting, courses would be given in it. But people would not become Bachelors of Knitting, but Bachelors of Arts, majoring in Knitting. In France, Knitting might claim its adherents, and it is possible that the Minister of Public Instruction might found an Institut National de Tricotage. He might even affiliate it with the University. But he would never dream of giving an *agrégation* in Knitting nor a *Docteur ès Lettres* in Knitting. That is French conservatism. It consists of inventing new names for new things. Californian radicalism consisted in calling new things by old names and hence preventing all discussion. One never knows what a degree means in this country. A woman can go to Teachers College at Columbia for four years and study design and come out a Bachelor of Science. Another can go to Berkeley and write a long paper on the *Persuasive Effect of Open-Vowels in Congressional Debate* and discover that she's a Doctor of Philosophy. There is no harm in studying design and the persuasive effect of any or all vowels, and I have no intention of suggesting that there is. The harm lies in an Administration's permitting and encouraging a poor girl to think that her work on Public Speaking is identical with someone else's in Logic, when the only similarity is the amount of time spent on them.

In Paris one notices the relegation of broad backgrounds to the *Cours Publics*. The *conférences* are for students and go into detail. Monsieur Picavet literally spent weeks on the question of how the doctrines of Plotinus were disseminated throughout the Western world. In a broad background course this information could and would have been conveyed in five minutes. But for purposes of scholarship, if one is really to know something of the history of the reflective imagination, it is just as important to know how a man living at one end of the world could influence a man living many years later at the other end as it is to know that the two held similar views. It is not enough to face similarity in thought; there is also the problem of how the similarity got there. But that is dull and does not come into a broad background. Monsieur Picavet's six women and twelve men, however, dull as it

was, gritted their teeth and went at it. It was beautiful to see them.

As a result of our broad backgrounds, our students do seem more able to generalize and to talk of movements and currents and tendencies. The French students I met seemed to spend more time on individuals. Whereas our student gets wildly excited over associationist psychology, the French student, as far as I know him, talks about Mill. To him a movement seems to be known by the men who made it; to us the men are known by the movements they sponsored. It is no question here of judging between the two habits of thought, for both have peculiar merits. The man who talks in general terms is likely not to be bewildered by a new name; but on the other hand he is likely to overlook essential differences between men and to leap to conclusions. He becomes impetuous and sometimes shallow. The man who deals in individuals, who treats every thinker first by himself and then by his relations to other thinkers, knows at least one thing thoroughly and doesn't assume the burden of proof borne by the generalizer. He doesn't talk wildly and extravagantly. But at the same time he runs the risk of limiting his vision.

When I say that the French student is interested in individuals and the American in principles, I do not mean either to make a sweeping statement covering all members of both classes nor yet to push the distinction too far. But it is typical to see a Frenchman start with a man like Condillac, examine his philosophy minutely, and after the examination seek to show its relation to materialism in general.

A French professor will take a text from Lamartine and develop a whole system of philosophy out of it. An American will take a system of philosophy and reduce it to a few texts. I was talking about this the other day to a Frenchman and he agreed that it was true, pointing out, however, that French thought, particularly in the field of literary criticism, was of both types. In Sainte-Beuve one finds the finest sort of criticism beginning with the individual; in Taine and in Brunetière one finds the opposite tendency, treating individuals as incidents in the history of thought, as not so very important incidents either. But, as my French friend said to me, "of course Taine is less French in his manner than English."

Now every Frenchman would not agree that Taine was anything but French; every Frenchman, though, would most decidedly agree that Sainte-Beuve was nothing if not French.

Taine's manner is not so much English as it is a false Hegelianism. And our manner, too, is, I believe, a result of our devotion to German education. German education may be very good in its way even if it does drive most of the German children to suicide—perhaps because it does. But it swamps the human being in an ocean of generality. Windelband's *History of Philosophy* moves along with scarcely a word about the Philosophers. They are out of place there, stuck off in small print like naughty children with their faces to the wall. That Plato had anything to do with the formulation of his ideas seems a heresy to Herr Windelband. His ideas were born of Socrates's. This is no place to engage in a discussion of historical method, but any American student of philosophy will recognize the school in which he was trained.

Unfortunately this school has grown attractive to the American student. I have seen him in four universities worshipping. It is very strange: we are supposed to be abnormally practical but we take to unfounded theory like fish to water. I have heard of men in Royce's class in metaphysics give an account of his doctrine with him present which must have made that most practical of philosophers doubt the testimony of his ears. But the amusing thing is that the American critic doesn't think Royce is practical, although the bulk of his work is on everyday problems, and he ended his life with a series of books on insurance in which even insurance experts could see nothing hazy. We almost unanimously misunderstood Royce, because he was original and had his ear to the ground. By the same token we hailed James as the most utterly American thinker we had, forgetting Emerson. His theory, we said, was practical and full of horse-sense. But James had nothing to say on American problems and Royce wrote a volume on them. James, though he gave a semblance of intellectual shrewdness by the use of homely phrases and picturesque figures of speech, is really so hopelessly abstract that not even pragmatists can understand him. And I hope no one will attempt to.

A Frenchman in the university is not allowed to grow



petty because of his interest in individuals. For when he comes up for his examinations, he is called upon to generalize and to expand, and he fails miserably unless he sees the doctrine above the man. In an American examination, the reverse is often the case, and the man who knows general facts and no particulars—who knows what he has been taught, alas—is bound to fail. And the instructor who asks for them is also bound to fail. But this difference is not radical, for the scholars of both nations have too much sense to overemphasize one manner of study.

The fundamental difference between the University of California and the Sorbonne is not, as I saw it, the quality of student nor the quality of teacher. These differences exist, but they are relatively unimportant, and will lessen as our West buys better books and stops listening to cranks. The fundamental difference is the quality of educational policy. This is too big a subject to be treated here, but I may say that no institution of learning can hope to justify itself unless knowledge be its aim. The Sorbonne has that aim, the Collège de France has that aim, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes has that aim. The University of California or of any other State has not that aim and does not pretend to. It exists for other ends entirely. It tries to improve the agricultural product, and the average home and the industrial output. But it thinks it cannot realize this fine programme by a simple homely procedure. It does not see far enough and does not appreciate the fact that the older university is carrying out its very modern plan without trouble and without expense. Thus the University of Paris holds a real place of honor in the community, whereas our expensive collections of professors and classrooms and young people mean nothing and are a problem in themselves. Having no common aim their work degrades; subjected to a narrow political group their growth is checked; hampered in their search for truth, they seek relief in rebellion, and achieve little more than the discredit of learning and instruction as a career.

GEORGE BOAS